

Prospects of Managing Madrasas in Nepal : Challenges and Future Direction

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God! There is no god
But He, - the Living
The Self - subsisting, Eternal.
No slumber can seize Him
Nor sleep. His are all things
in the heavens and on earth.

The meaning of the GLORIOUS QURAN Sura II: Baqara, Section 34, 255.

Abstract

Islamic education is a value based ancient seat of learning which is usually delivered in religious educational institutions popularly known as Madrasas. The challenge of managing Madrasas today lies in striking a balance between growing strength of modernity and traditional cultural as well as religious values of Islamic education. The challenge of transforming Madrasa as a learning organization-from survival learning to adaptive and generative learning- is there as it has to continue the tradition of Islamic instruction and prepare the Muslim children and youth for modernity that results from the world of work. Managing the transformation of Madrasa along the spirit of change is a daunting task for the Head of the Madrasa as it does not want to lose its identity as a cultural and religious epitome of Islamic education and learning. Growing number of Muslim girls in the Madrasas as compared to their counterparts-boys, indicates the issue of maintaining gender parity as the boys are more in favor of going beyond the traditional school to modern school leaving behind the case of empowering the girls through the tradition bound Madrasas. As the Madrasas in Nepal are a living cultural and religious reality, they should be managed as a cultural seat of learning by also being receptive to the demands posed by modernity.

Keywords : Islamic instruction, Religious seat of learning, Mainstream school, Learning organization, Gender parity, Modernity.

The Context

Madrasa is a school/college for Islamic instruction. Its origin is Arabic stemming from the word 'Darasa' which literally means 'to study'. As the tradition goes, Madrasa has remained a seat for learning, especially religious and cultural learning. The Islamic philosophy which is derived from the Holy Quran forms both the form and substance of religious learning in Madrasa. As Madrasa has remained an epitome of glorious tradition of Islamic religion and philosophy, its management has always been a matter of concern of both the government and private organizations along with the influential personalities of the contemporary time. The management of it has to keep both the tradition and its development together. This is considered

as a challenge as its management has to strike a balance between the glorious tradition and ever changing modernity. Public or private ownership of such an institution of learning is also to be viewed as a shared responsibility. Linking Madrasa with mainstream education is a growing realization of the government on one hand and keeping its tradition and religious identity as a school of Islamic instruction is a matter of critical concern to the Muslim people on the other. This paper is an attempt in this direction.

The Practice

Management of Madrasa is not a uniform practice in Nepal as a variety of approaches is observed in its funding modality, operational mechanism and ownership practice. The researches carried out in this aspect have many things to say from its operational mechanism to ownership for its sustainability. We are aware of the fact that Islamic society is fundamentally guided by the twin principles of staunch belief in the Allah (god) and a moral conduct (Tauhidi, 1996). A Madrasa, therefore, symbolizes both these principles that call for its management on a different footing. Management of Madrasas requires that -

1. A Madrasa management committee like the SMC of regular school be there with dominant presence of Muslim intellectuals, religious leaders and community members.
2. A strong continuous government support, mainly in terms of financial and material support, be made available for its smooth operation and sustainability
3. No external interference be exerted on Madrasa giving it a full-fledged autonomy in its management
4. A Madrasa Board at the central level should be a regular structure for the policy level decisions and overall direction
5. As a cultural, religious and social seat of learning, religious and cultural studies should be managed in such a way that they should precede other subjects
6. Management of mainstream education in Madrasa should be seen with an integrated approach to encourage the students to enter the world of work, though not at the cost of Islamic spirit and belief.

The above requirements reflect some of the findings made by the formative research project studies {FRP study reports, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008} in relation to the Madrasa system of education in Nepal. The FRP reports provided inputs to the intended improvement in the management of Madrasas from the perspective of their linkage with regular education for the desired integration of curriculum: integrated curriculum. Some of the highlights of the reports relating management of Madrasas are presented briefly in the following sentences:

1. Lack of religious education in the mainstream schools, lack of Islamic environment, language of instruction being different from the local language/mother tongue and lack of awareness contributed to low participation of Muslim children in schools.
2. Though the Madrasas have sufficient number of teachers to teach Islamic courses, lack of mainstream teachers to teach mainstream subjects like Nepali, English, Science, Mathematics, Social Studies is negating the intended linkage with mainstream education.
3. Physical facilities like furniture, instructional materials and classrooms were not adequate in the Madrasas.
4. Though Madrasas are managed by Madrasa Management Committee, the committee

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was not as representative of the local community as expected because all the sectors of local Muslim community were not represented in the committee. Also, proper and scientific record system was less visible in the management system of the Madrasas.

5. Madrasa education could fulfill the religious and cultural needs of the Muslim children and youth but it could little meet the demand of modern life as it could little prepare them for the world of work.
6. Financial support, monitoring of Madrasas, supply of mainstream subjects teachers and formation of a Madrasa Board at the central level were voiced as demands by the Muslim community and were put before the government for making the linkage of Madrasa with mainstream education successful.
7. Madrasas can work both as an institution for cultural education and mainstream education in order to fulfill the goal of EFA. However, external influence or intervention of any form to spoil both the cultural identity and environment of the Madrasas should not be tolerated.
8. The autonomy of Madrasas should not be compromised with the freedom given to them to register as mainstream institution as the property and management can not be handed to the government. So a Madrasa Act should be there to this effect and its governance should be the Madrasa Board responsibility, not the government's.
9. The issue of sustainability of registered Madrasas, increasing inflow of girls students without proper incentive, a central level planning board for the policy related issues of Madrasas and the need for an integrated curriculum to strike a balance between Islamic courses and mainstream subjects were the other critical issues related to the management of Madrasas in Nepal.

As the teacher training of teachers engaged in the Madrasas, especially in Key subject areas as Nepali, English, Science, Mathematics is a matter of critical concern, NCED has a visible role to contribute to this aspect through its regular teacher training program with a focus on the Madrasa teachers.

The Challenges of Managing Madrasas

Islamic education is a value based ancient seat of learning which is confronted with the twin challenges of keeping its cultural and religious importance intact and preparing it for facing the challenges, posed by modernity. 'Civilization is indebted to Islam', said Barack Obama, President of the United States when he delivered a speech at Cairo University, Egypt on June 4, 2009. To quote him further, "Islam carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment. Islamic culture has given us majestic arches and soaring spires, timeless poetry and cherished music, elegant calligraphy and places of peaceful contemplation. And throughout history, Islam has demonstrated through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality." This, when interpreted in managerial terms, implies that management of Islamic education to meet the twin challenges of the time is itself a challenging task.

Islam, unlike Hindu religion which divides people into caste categories, divides people into male and female with different tasks to perform, slightly hinting out male to be superior to female (Luitel, 2008). The study of CERID (2008), however, shows that Muslim girls, compared to their counterparts - boys, are more inclined to go to Madrasas for the study. Higher number of

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girls than boys in the Madrasas supports this. Management of Madrasas is, therefore, a crucial activity of striking a balance between such aspects as ensuring gender parity and empowering the girl child to be equal to her counterpart.

A large number of Madrasas are still to register themselves as mainstream schools to reach and realize the spirit of EFA, stands there as an issue. The issues of ensuring autonomy to save cultural as well as religious identity of Madrasas, sustainability, ownership, transformation of Madrasas into quality learning institutions, medium of instruction in the mainstream Madrasa schools, Madrasa governing board, teacher recruitment and license, girls incentive, all these and many more other issues act as the challenges to the management of Madrasas in the country.

The challenge of transforming Madrasa as a learning organization (from survival learning to adaptive and generative learning) (Senge, 1990) is there as it has to continue the tradition of Islamic instruction and prepare the Muslim children and youth for modernity that results from the world of work. Managing the transformation of Madrasa along the spirit of change is a daunting task for the Head of the Madrasa as it does not want to lose its identity as a cultural and religious epitome of Islamic education and learning.

Another challenge confronting the Madrasa from its managerial perspective is its financial standing as an independent institution away from the influence and interference of the government (Ministry of Education). The public pulse of the Muslim people is for adequate financial support and regular assistance from the government. The Madrasa receives a wide support from the Muslim community but how long, is the crux of the problem associated with its sustainability.

The Prospects

The challenges confronting Management of Madrasa are many, nonetheless, its prospects are no little. A well-managed Madrasa is not only an easily accessible learning opportunity for all including the girl child, but also a cultural seat of learning that transmits Islamic values from generation to generation. Mainstreaming of Madrasa is therefore an EFA contributor that directly aids the government in ensuring equitable access to education for all irrespective of the differences, difficulties, disadvantages of the children and youth. The prospect of Madrasa management is therefore high in making it an accommodative, representative organization of learning.

Establishing linkage between Madrasa and mainstream education provides the society with an opportunity to exchange ideas, values, experiences and expertise which go a long way to develop feeling of co-existence and religious and cultural tolerance. Nepal has a unique history of peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance and wider linkage between the regular and Islamic institution is expected to provide a forum for the general populace to meet this end. As the Madrasas, old and new, act as the bridges between the Muslim and non-Muslim societies through their mainstreaming approach, their existence as cultural and religious institutions can be strongly justified.

Despite the religious nature of the Madrasa, the government of Nepal's inviting approach for mainstream education and extending financial support thereof (Report of the Subcommittee on

Policy Recommendation for the Permission/Approval, and Other Process-based Activities for Madrasa Management, 2066) will contribute to lessen the burden of the government in reaching all the children of school going age through educational provisions.

Another prospect of Madrasa management is related with ownership. Madrasa is basically a community owned and governed institution surviving with community contribution and support. Ministry of Education is very much in favour of transferring the existing community schools to community managed schools under the CSSP of the DOE. If the problem of infrastructural inadequacy of Madrasas is addressed, educational materials are supplied and the subject teachers in Math, English, Nepali, Science subjects supplied, the Madrasas can be instrumental in bridging the gap between the Muslim and non-Muslim societies by unfolding ways to harmonize their relations.

Relaxation of registration fee for the Madrasas to come into being as mainstream education institution without losing their character of cultural and religious learning has been an inviting approach of the government drawing attention of many Madrasas to benefit from the provision. Such a mainstream situation will place both the government and Madrasa management on a new footing to open up possibilities for the shared responsibility in the area of teacher supply, teacher training, curriculum development, supply of education materials, financial assistance and many more areas.

Future Direction

Madrasas in Nepal as cultural and religious learning institutions are a living reality. The Islamic culture has epitomized them as a religious and cultural seat of learning for the past hundreds of years. Researches carried out in this field have come up with the conclusion that sustainability of these institutions solely on their traditional attire will be difficult unless they are prepared also to face and cope with the challenges posed by the world of work due to fast speed of globalization taking place in almost all the nooks and corners of the world.

The following management strategies are recommended for the longevity of the Madrasas and their contribution in Nepal:

1. Establish a central level Madrasa Board for facilitating policies and plans to guide the smooth operation of the Madrasas at different levels.
2. Make the existing Madrasa Management Committee as representative committee of all the sectors of society in the local Muslim community.
3. Continue the trend and tradition of encouraging the Madrasas to register them as mainstream education institution to benefit from the relaxation of registration fee.
4. Ensure through an enactment of legal provision the policy of no interference to the cultural and religious identity of the Madrasas; if needed, amend the existing Education Act to this effect.
5. Allow the Madrasas to function as community schools though they may have been registered as or under community, private or public organizations.
6. Treat the Madrasas as institutions worth receiving regular grants (financial assistance) based on their strength, girls enrollment and students' learning outcome.

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7. Supply, in needed quantity and number, the subject teachers and educational materials along with lumpsum grant assistance to improve the physical facilities of the Madrasas.
8. Employ or consult with the Muslim religious leaders and intellectuals along with regular educationists to develop integrated curriculum and learning materials for making the Madrasas open or receptive to modernity.
9. Under the student incentive scheme, make a provision to help the girl child through girl incentive program to ensure their retention through the learning cycle.
10. Allow and encourage the Madrasas to work as literacy providers and also as alternative schooling system in order to facilitate and ensure the access to educational opportunities, especially for the disadvantaged and excluded even within the Muslim community.
11. Introduce Teacher License system in the Madrasas by also ensuring teacher training provision through a joint public private partnership program.
12. Ensure monitoring of Madrasas as to the delivery of quality education by prompting and helping them to initiate and maintain records through an EMIS system.

Conclusion

The Islamic seat of learning-Madrasas in Nepal, are a living reality also as cultural and religious learning institution. The Islamic culture has epitomized them as a religious and cultural seat of learning for the past hundreds of years. Sustainability of these institutions solely on their traditional value and religious giving will be difficult unless they are prepared to face and cope with the challenges posed by the world of work. The world of work is growing to be more and more competitive with the rapid speed of globalization taking place in almost all the spheres of the world. The greatest challenge for a Madrasa therefore lies not in its traditional form of existence but in its capacity to adapt to the changing needs of time.

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